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## **COUNTERPOINT TO STALINGRAD, Operation Mars (November-December 1942): Marshal Zhukov's Greatest Defeat**

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### ***Introduction***

After enduring months of bitter and costly defensive combat at Stalingrad, on 19 November 1942, Red Army forces struck a massive blow against the hitherto triumphant German Army. To the Germans' utter consternation, within one week Soviet forces encircled German Sixth Army in the deadly Stalingrad cauldron. Ten weeks later, the army's tattered remnants surrendered, ending the most famous battle of the German-Soviet War.

History states the titanic Battle of Stalingrad altered the course of war on the German Eastern Front and set the *Wehrmacht* and German *Reich* on its path toward utter and humiliating defeat. History accorded enduring fame to the victors of Stalingrad. The victorious Red Army seemingly never again suffered strategic or significant operational defeat.<sup>1</sup> The architects of the Stalingrad victory entered the annals of military history as unvanquished heroes who led the subsequent Soviet march to victory. Foremost among them was Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov, the hero of Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, and Berlin.

History, however, has misinformed U.S.. The muses of history are fickle. They record only what was reported and ignore what was not. The adage, "To the victors belong the spoils," applies to history as well as war. As a spoil of war, history also exerts a powerful influence over future generations. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the case of Germany's war on the Eastern Front. The victorious Germans proudly recounted the triumphant course of the war to late 1942. Thereafter, the victorious Soviets proclaimed their martial feats, and few Germans disputed them.

The place names of 1941 and 1942 fame, such as Minsk, Kiev, Smolensk, and Khar'kov, properly evoke images of German triumph, while the names Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, Belorussia, and Berlin resound as unqualified Soviet victories. These images, however, are deceptive and flawed. For example, despite the impressive German advances in 1941 and 1942, German Operations Barbarossa and Blau [Blue] failed, Moscow and Leningrad

remained in Soviet hands, and catastrophic German defeats followed, which culminated in the destruction of the German Reich.

Likewise, the history of the later war years has misled U.S. to an even greater extent by failing to qualify seemingly unending Soviet battlefield success. Understandably, the Soviets were quite reluctant to tarnish their record, and the Germans often avoided the unpleasantness by simply attributing defeat to a demented Hitler and overwhelming Soviet strength. The resulting Soviet combat record thus resembled a seamless, unblemished march to inevitable victory. This flawed historical mosaic has perverted the war's history by masking numerous Soviet failures and defeats which punctuated the Red Army's admittedly victorious march. It has also elevated the reputations of certain victorious Soviet commanders such as G. K. Zhukov and I. S. Konev to almost superhuman proportions, covering up the fact that, after all, they too were human and, as such, demonstrated characteristic human weaknesses.

This article begins the process of correcting the historical record of this most terrible war by identifying the flaws and by placing those famous battles which have already been recorded and extolled in their proper context. This is an impartial process, for almost as much has been forgotten about the period of German victory before late 1942 as has been forgotten about the Soviet triumphant march after late 1942.<sup>2</sup>

Soviet Operation Mars is the most glaring instance where the historiography of the German-Soviet War has failed U.S..<sup>3</sup> Originally planned for late-October 1942, but postponed until 25 November, Operation Mars was intended to be a companion piece to Operation Uranus, the code-name for the Soviet's Stalingrad strategic counteroffensive. By conducting Operations Mars and Uranus, the Soviet *Stavka* [Headquarters of the High Command] sought to regain the strategic initiative on the Eastern Front and set the Red Army on the path to total victory. Planned and conducted by Marshal G. K. Zhukov and a host of other famous Soviet generals and appropriately named for the God of War, Operation Mars formed the centerpiece of Soviet strategic designs in Fall 1942. Its immense scale and ambitious strategic intent made Operation Mars at least as important as Operation Uranus and likely more important. In its fickleness, however, history has forgotten Operation Mars because it failed, while it has extolled Operation Uranus because it succeeded.

Today, sufficient German and Soviet archival materials are available to permit correction of this historical mistake and to commemorate properly the sacrifices of the half million Red Army soldiers and the many Germans who fell during the operation, a figure which exceeds the military death toll of the United States Armed Forces throughout the entire war.

### ***Prelude***

In late September 1942, key *Stavka* political and military leaders formulated a strategy to reverse the fortunes of war.<sup>4</sup> Their plans reflected the bitter experiences of the prior 18 months of war and the military realities they confronted. During the tragic initial period of war in 1941, the ambitious German Operation Barbarossa had propelled German forces to the gates of Leningrad, Moscow, and Rostov before stiffened Soviet resistance and the effects of the Soviet Union's vast territorial expanse combined to bring exhausted German forces to a halt. German overextension and a desperate Soviet counteroffensive

inflicted unprecedented, but temporary, defeat on Blitzkrieg at the very gates of Moscow in December 1941. Despite subsequent Soviet successes in the harsh winter which followed, however, German forces remained menacingly close to the Soviet capital. Undeterred by their Moscow setback and inspired by the disastrous defeat of twin Soviet offensives in May 1942 at Khar'kov and in the Crimea, in June 1942 the German Army unleashed Operation Blau in an attempt to regain the strategic initiative and win the conflict. Replicating their ambitious 1941 operations, although on a lesser scale, in summer 1942 German forces plunged eastward across the endless steppes of southern Russia to the banks of the Volga River at Stalingrad and toward the oil-rich Caucasus region. After spectacular gains, the headlong German offensive reached the banks of the Volga in September but ground to a halt in October in the ruins of Stalingrad city and along the treacherous northern slopes of the imposing Caucasus Mountain barrier (see Map 1). Once again, German planners and operators alike had underestimated the resilience of the Red Army, the imposing challenges of the immense theater of operations, and the stoic resolution of their foes. Once again, in fall 1942 the *Wehrmacht* faced the inevitable wrath of a Soviet winter counteroffensive. The only question was, Where?



**Map 1 - The Summer-Fall Campaign, May-October 1942**

[River], which had cost him about forty percent of his attacking force and had prompted sharp criticism from the Red Army General Staff.<sup>6</sup>

After beginning the war as Chief of the Red Army General Staff, Zhukov received field command and was instrumental in bloodying the German's nose in the terrible battles around Smolensk in July and August 1941. In September Stalin relieved Zhukov of his

### *Planning*

Marshal Zhukov played a significant role in September and October 1942 *Stavka* planning sessions.<sup>5</sup> This was so because he had earned Stalin's trust by proving to be a tenacious and often victorious fighter. A former cavalry officer, Zhukov had earned much of his reputation as a fighter in action against the Japanese in August and September 1939. Forces under his command had utterly routed Japanese forces at Khalkhin Gol in eastern Mongolia, a defeat which later contributed to the critical Japanese decision to remain aloof from the German-Soviet War. Few now recall, however, the ruthlessness of Zhukov's assaults along the Khalkhin Gol

command along the Western axis and dispatched him to Leningrad, ostensibly because Zhukov disagreed with Stalin's disastrous decision to defend Kiev. After stabilizing Soviet defenses around Leningrad, in October Stalin summoned Zhukov to Moscow, where he needed a fighter to halt the German juggernaut. Zhukov answered Stalin's call by planning and leading the victorious Soviet Moscow counteroffensives in winter 1942. Subsequently, in spring and summer 1942, he commanded Soviet forces along the Moscow axis. While the Germans were advancing on Stalingrad, Zhukov orchestrated several offensives against German forces in the central sector of the front, including a major attack on the Rzhev salient in August, which was a virtual rehearsal for Operation Mars.<sup>7</sup>

Based on his own strategic analysis and personal combat experiences, Zhukov believed in a "northern" strategy for winning the war. Frustrated over his failure to destroy German forces at Moscow in winter 1941-42 and in lesser operations during the German advance across southern Russia during 1942, Zhukov believed that the Soviet Union could best achieve strategic victory by smashing German forces along the Moscow axis. In short, Zhukov considered that German Army Group Center, whose forces were lodged in the Rzhev salient menacingly close to Moscow, posed the most serious threat to Moscow and the Soviet war effort. In his view, the Rzhev salient, a legacy of the chaotic fighting of winter 1941-42, which measured 150 x 150 kilometers and which contained Army Group Center's powerful German Ninth Army, represented a dagger aimed at Moscow. Therefore, argued Zhukov, the Soviet Union could best achieve strategic victory in 1942 by smashing German Ninth Army in the salient and, thereafter, all of German Army Group Center.<sup>8</sup>

From his earlier combat experiences, Zhukov well understood that this would be no easy task. General Walter Model's German Ninth Army had erected strong defenses around the salient and had fortified all cities and towns along the salient's periphery, including the key cities of Rzhev, Belyi, and Sychevka. The Germans had fortified the rivers flanking the salient and had cleared timber from the main north-south and east-west roads and rail lines which traversed the salient. Zhukov and Model both understood that whoever controlled the roads would control the salient. Although heavy forests and swamps dominated the terrain in the salient's western and central regions, the Germans had cleared sufficient terrain to permit both firm defense and the maneuver of mobile tactical and operational reserves within it. In addition, by late October, the dirt roads and many rivers criss-crossing the salient should be frozen or close to frozen.

Zhukov also realized that General Model would be a formidable opponent, for he too was a fighter. Model had delivered a stinging rebuff to Soviet forces in the region in winter 1941, and combat in 1942 provided Model's forces with a keen appreciation of literally every inch of terrain in the region. Nevertheless, Zhukov was convinced that his forces, together with the massive strategic reserves which the *Stavka* had assembled at near-frenzied pace in summer 1942, were strong enough to permit the Red Army to deliver two major, mutually supporting strategic counteroffensives, one, which he advocated, against German Army Group Center and the other, which others supported, against overextended German Army Group South at Stalingrad.

During the *Stavka*'s deliberations, Zhukov emphasized Soviet force superiority in the decisive central sector of the front. Here the Soviet Kalinin and Western Fronts, supported by the Moscow Defense Zone, numbered almost 1,900,000 men with over

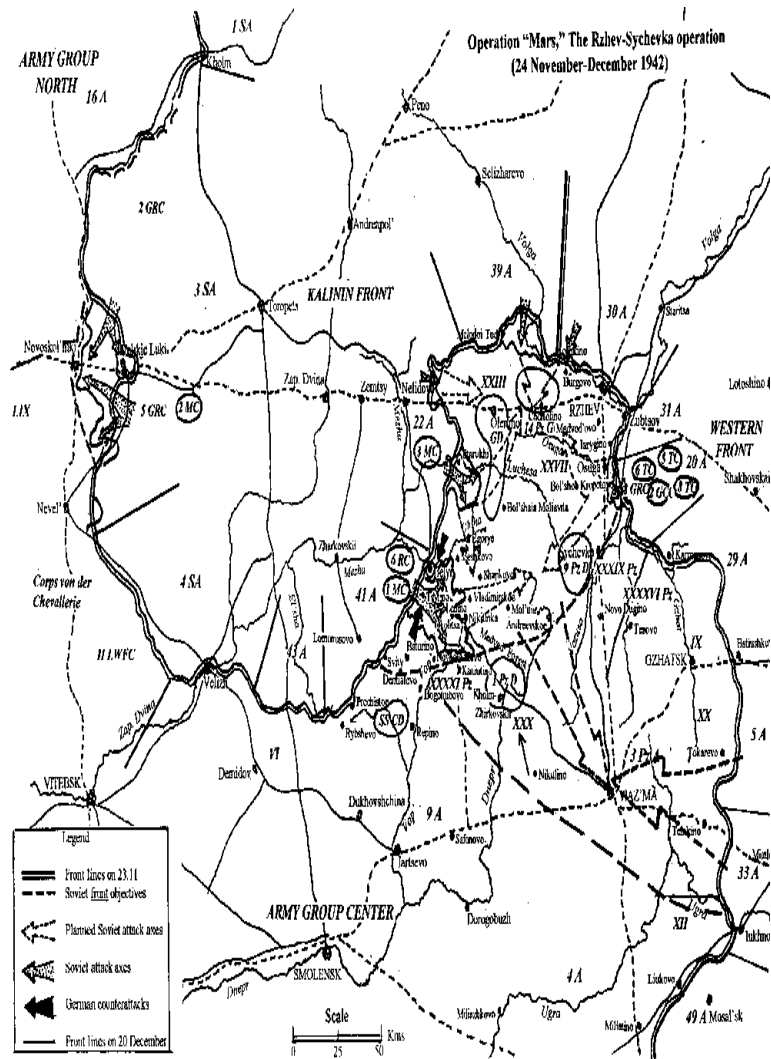
24,000 guns and mortars, 3,300 tanks, and 1,100 aircraft.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, in the southern Soviet Union, the 3 Soviet *fronts* in the Stalingrad region fielded over 1 million men with about 15,000 guns and mortars, 1,400 tanks, and over 900 aircraft.<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, the Rumanian, Italian, and Hungarian forces deployed in the south added to German vulnerability, and their presence there undoubtedly improved Soviet chances for success. However, Zhukov argued, eradication of the German threat to Moscow would inevitably contribute to success in the south as well. Should either Soviet offensive falter, *Stavka* reserves could develop and exploit the other offensive.<sup>11</sup> Stalin accepted Zhukov's recommendations, for he too still seethed over previous failures to defeat German Army Group Center.

On the evening of 26 September, the *Generalissimo* ordered major strategic counteroffensives be conducted at both Rzhev and Stalingrad. Appropriately, Zhukov would command the former, and his contemporary, General A. M. Vasilevsky, would command the latter. Vasilevsky, then Chief of the General Staff and Deputy Minister of Defense, was a penultimate staff officer and a protégé of former Chief of the General Staff, Marshal B. M. Shaposhnikov. At the outbreak of war, Vasilevsky had been chief of the General Staff's Operations Directorate, and, because of his obvious talents, he rose from colonel to colonel general in only four years. His wartime accomplishments as key General Staff planner and "fireman" in key operational sectors had won Stalin's confidence and appointment in July 1942 as Chief of the General Staff. Vasilevsky's calm demeanor and keen intelligence tended to moderate both Stalin's and Zhukov's excesses.<sup>12</sup>

With Stalin's formal approval, the General Staff, Zhukov, and Vasilevsky planned the twin two-phased strategic offensives and assigned each of four planned operations with the code name of a planet. In Operation Mars, planned to commence in late October, forces of the Kalinin and Western Fronts would encircle and destroy German Ninth Army in the Rzhev salient. Two to three weeks later, in Operation Jupiter, the Western Front's powerful 5th and 33d Armies, supported by 3d Guards Tank Army, would attack along the Viaz'ma axis, link up with the victorious Mars' force, and envelop and destroy all German forces east of Smolensk.<sup>13</sup> Vasilevsky's initial operation, code-named Uranus and tentatively timed for mid-November, was to envelop German Sixth Army in the Stalingrad region.<sup>14</sup> In Operation Saturn, set to begin in early December, Vasilevsky's forces would seize Rostov, envelop German Army Group B, pin its remnants against the Sea of Azov, and cut off the withdrawal of German Army Group A from the Caucasus.<sup>15</sup> The *Stavka* dispatched the directive for Operation Mars to the Western and Kalinin Fronts on 28-29 September, and participating *fronts* issued orders to their armies on 1 October.<sup>16</sup> Although the offensive was slated to begin on 28 October, rainy weather delayed the usual October freeze and forced postponement of the operation until late November, less than a week after Vasilevsky launched Operation Uranus.<sup>17</sup> A revised *Stavka* directive, dispatched to Army General I. S. Konev's Western Front on 10 October, left the original objectives intact, stating: "The forces of the Western Front's right wing and Kalinin Front's left wing are to encircle the enemy Rzhev Grouping, capture Rzhev, and free the rail road line from Moscow to Velikie Luki" (see Map 2).<sup>18</sup> The directive required Western Front's 20th and 31st Armies, supported by 29th Army, to make the main attack against German defenses along the Osuga and Vazusa Rivers northeast of Sychevka. Once these armies had penetrated German tactical defenses, a cavalry-



mechanized group (6th Tank and 2d Guards Cavalry Corps) was to exploit through 20th Army, capture Sychevka, roll up the German Rzhev defenses from the south, and link up with 41st Army forces attacking eastward from the Belyi region. 20th and 31st Armies would then mop up German forces in the salient in conjunction with supporting armies and prepare to attack southward toward Viaz'ma with 6th Tank and the fresh 5th Tank



Map 2 - Operation "Mars," The Rzhev-Sychevka operation (24 November - December 1942)

Corps.

Army General M. A. Purkaev's Kalinin Front was to conduct its main attack south of Belyi with 41st Army and along the Luchesa River north of Belyi with 22d Army, while 39th Army, at the northern extremity of the Rzhev salient, would launch a secondary assault southward across the Molodoi Tud River toward Olenino.<sup>19</sup> The crack Stalin 6th Volunteer Rifle Corps would spearhead 41st Army's attack. Once German defenses had been penetrated, 1st and 2d Mechanized Corps would exploit eastward to link up west of Sychevka with 20th Army's cavalry-mechanized group. Kalinin Front's 22d Army, spearheaded by 3d Mechanized Corps, would advance eastward up the Luchesa River

valley, pierce German defenses, assist in the capture of Belyi, and encircle German forces around Olenino in conjunction with 39th Army. After the main attacks had succeeded, other Soviet armies around the flaming circumference of the Rzhev salient would join the offensive, destroy German Ninth Army, and regroup to participate in Operation Jupiter.<sup>20</sup> In Operation Jupiter, Western Front's heavily reinforced 5th and 33d Armies, deployed astride the Moscow-Viaz'ma road, would penetrate German defenses east of Viaz'ma. The 9th and 10th Tank Corps, followed by 3d Guards Tank Army, would then exploit to capture Viaz'ma, link up with Kalinin Front forces, and, if possible, continue the attack toward Smolensk.<sup>21</sup> To insure success the *Stavka* provided extraordinary armor, artillery, and engineer support for Zhukov's two attacking *fronts*.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Zhukov's over 2,300 tanks and 10,000 guns and mortars exceeded the firepower the *Stavka* allocated to Vasilevsky to carry out Operation Uranus.

The long delay in the launch of the operation provided more than adequate time for Zhukov and the *front* commanders to assemble their imposing host and prepare the troops for combat. As usual, to insure the secrecy of the operation, troops were notified of the attack only days before it commenced. Typical of last minute preparations was this order to the 20th Army's 8th Guards Rifle Corps:

To the commanders of 8th Guards Rifle Corps formations.

20.11.42

...the corps orders:

1. Fully occupy jumping-off positions by dawn on 23.11.42....Carefully conceal movement of personnel and equipment....
2. [Move] infantry in small groups and tanks, vehicles, and transport individually.....
3. Eliminate squads and platoons made up of "nationals" [ethnic non-Russians] by dividing them up among subunits. For camouflage purposes, whitewash all guns and transporters....
4. During the day on 22.11.42 conduct study of the attack axes with command personnel....
- 5....
  - a). Provide personnel with a chance for a good sleep and, without fail, feed [the troops] with warm food and distribute the required vodka norm before the attack....
  - b). Provide all personnel with a bath and a pair of clean clothes....
  - c). Obtain white camouflage overalls and felt boots.....

8th Guards Rifle Corps chief of staff, Guards Colonel Posiakin Chief of the corps' operation section, Guards Colonel Andrianov<sup>23</sup>

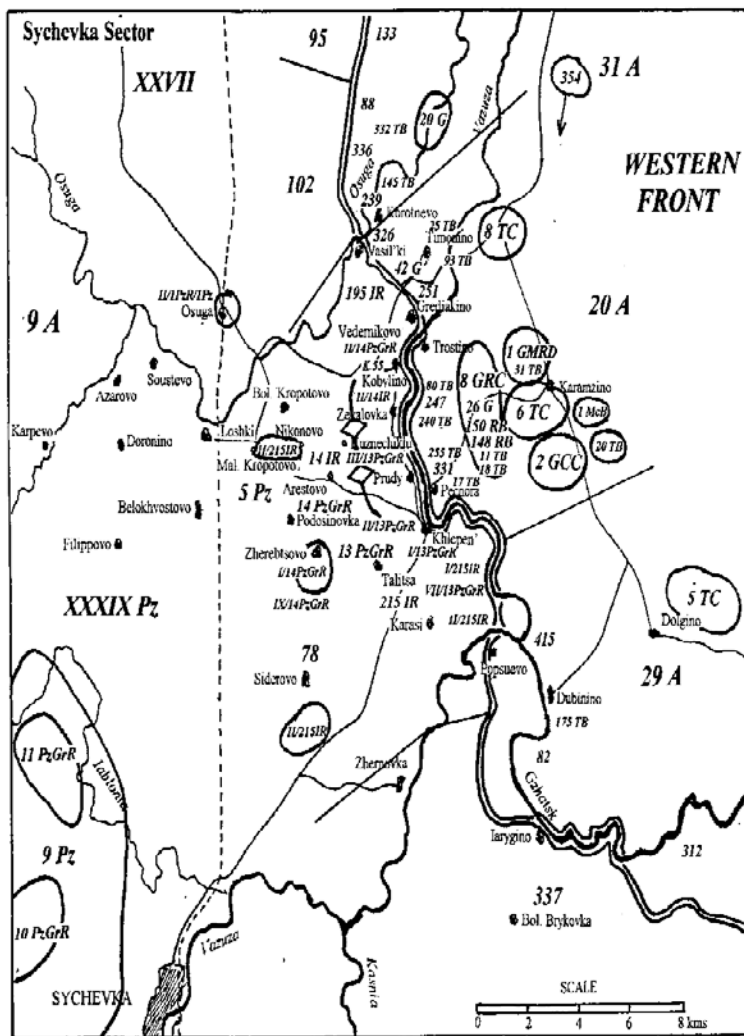
The plan for Operation Mars bore all the characteristics of a Zhukov-style offensive operation. To maximize pressure on the Germans, his forces would attack simultaneously in all sectors. By launching his main attacks against the base of the Rzhev salient from both east and west, Zhukov sought to envelop German forces in the salient with frontal assaults without having to conduct complex maneuver with his mobile forces across the difficult terrain and in the harsh weather conditions. To achieve quick success in his attack sectors, Zhukov ordered his *front* commanders to mass their forces and commit all of their armor early in the battle. By doing so, he hoped that the Soviet armored spearheads could sever vital German communications routes, the key road and rail lines

along the flanks of the Rzhev salient. By late November the long-awaited cold weather finally arrived, and area rivers, streams, and swamps froze, thus permitting operations to commence. The ensuing constant snowy weather, however, hampered mobile operations, hindered artillery observation, and grounded supporting aircraft on both sides.

### *Assault*

Zhukov's offensive began early on 25 November simultaneously against the eastern, western, and northern flanks of the German Rzhev salient.<sup>24</sup> Preceded by vicious artillery preparation, infantry and supporting tanks of Western Front's 20th and 31st Armies' struck hard at the defensive positions of German XXXIX Panzer Corps along and north of the Vazusa and Osuga Rivers northeast of the vital German rail head of Sychevka (see Map 3). Although the Germans expected an attack soon, the assault caught the defenders at an awkward moment, when their 78th Infantry Division was in the midst of conducting a relief-in-place of 5th Panzer Division forces along the Vazusa.<sup>25</sup> Numbering well over 200,000 men and 500 tanks, the 2 Soviet armies faced about 40,000 German defenders. Despite this numerical superiority and initial German confusion, the violent attack achieved only mixed results since German forces occupied strong defenses, and Soviet forces had to assault across generally open and rolling terrain at a time when incessant fog and driving snow showers reduced the effectiveness of the Soviet artillery preparation.





Map 3 - Dispositions on 24 November 1942

North of the Osuga River, the German 102d Infantry Division successfully repelled repeated assaults by 20,000 infantry and over 100 tanks of 3 Soviet 31st Army divisions.<sup>26</sup> Soviet infantry clad in winter white advanced in echelon, their ranks interspersed with supporting tanks. German artillery, machine guns, and small arms fire tore gaping holes in the ranks of the assaulting infantry as antitank weapons picked off the accompanying tanks. For three days and at a cost of more than half of their riflemen and most of their tanks,, the Soviets hurled themselves in vain at the 102d Division's prepared defenses.<sup>27</sup> Faced with this determined resistance, the 31st Army's assault collapsed, and, despite Zhukov's and Konev's exhortations, it could not be revived. Three 20th Army rifle divisions attacking between the Vazusa and Osuga Rivers met the same grisly fate. Despite strong armored support, their attacks stalled after suffering frightful losses.<sup>28</sup> Undeterred by the initial failures, the carnage

increased as Zhukov and Konev insisted the attacks continue to support operations further south.

To the south, along the banks of the frozen Vazusa River, a single rifle division of Major General N. I. Kiriukhin's 20th Army achieved signal, if limited success. Taking advantage of the Germans' temporary confusion, Major General G. D. Mukhin's 247th Rifle Division, supported by tank brigade of about 50 tanks, lunged across the frozen Vazusa River, tore through forward German positions, and seized 2 German fortified villages on the river's western bank.<sup>29</sup> Exploiting the opportunity, General Kiriukhin quickly moved Colonel P. F. Berestov's 331st Rifle Division across the river and into the breach. Fierce fighting raged all day in the rolling open country west of the river as Soviet infantry struggled to overcome pesky German village strong points and expand the bridgehead. It was critical they do so, for Konev and Kiriukhin planned to commit their second echelon 8th Guards Rifle Corps and their mobile group, the 6th Tank and 2d Guards Cavalry Corps, into the breach to enlarge the bridgehead and exploit the operation

westward.<sup>30</sup> All day, exhorting, cursing, and cajoling, Zhukov, Konev, and Kiriukhin urged their men on. By day's end, although the bridgehead was still too small, Konev decided to accept the risk and ordered Kiriukhin's second echelon and mobile group to advance the next morning.

This decision, however, turned out to be premature and ill-advised because the hard-pressed German forces offered stubborn and desperate resistance. Caught midst their complex regrouping, both 5th Panzer and 78th Infantry Division troops fought with grim abandon. Small ad hoc German combat groups [*kampfgruppen*] of infantry, tanks, and artillery in company and battalion strength fiercely defended their hedgehog defenses around the numerous log and stone villages that dotted the generally open, rolling, and snow-covered fields west of the Vazusa River. Attacking Soviet forces lapped around these defenses, overcame some, but left many as deadly obstacles strewn throughout their rear area. Beset by command, control, and communications problems, the German XXXIX Panzer Corps could not appreciate the chaos their fragmented resistance was causing in Soviet ranks. Nevertheless, the corps took desperate measures to shore up its sagging defenses and ordered its reserve 9th Panzer Division, then in camp west of Sychevka, to march to the sounds of the guns and plug the developing breeches.

The Soviet command also appreciated the gravity of the situation. On the night of 25-26 November, while Mukhin's and Berestov's riflemen strained to expand their tenuous bridgehead, Soviet second echelon and exploitation forces struggled forward. Under constant German artillery fire, over 200 tanks, 30,000 infantry, and 10,000 cavalymen, with their accompanying logistical trains, moved inexorably forward through the murky darkness along 2 frozen dirt roads through the light forests to the east bank of the river. Since both roads had been unmercifully chopped up by artillery fire, and too many forces were using them at the same time, the consequences were predictable. Chaos ruled supreme. The reinforcing infantry and tanks of the 8th Guards Rifle Corps clogged the crossing sites over the Vazusa as harried *front* and army staff officers tried in vain to clear the way for the advancing armor and cavalry of 6th Tank and 2d Guards Cavalry Corps. It was an impossible task. Although the rifle corps made it across the river, the tank and cavalry corps could not.<sup>31</sup> It was mid-day on 26 November before the 170 tanks of Colonel P. M. Arman's tank corps could go into action, and the mounted troopers of Major General V. V. Kriukov's 2d Guards Cavalry Corps remained east of the river until 27 November. To Zhukov's and Konev's utter frustration, offensive momentum was already flagging. Furthermore, reinforcing forces had already suffered light casualties and were disorganized after the chaotic night march.

The defending Germans experienced the full impact of Kiriukhin's assault on 27 November. While German reserves from the 9th Panzer Division maneuvered into blocking positions along the open terrain either side of the critical Rzhev-Sychevka road, German front-line forces desperately, but skillfully defended their fortified village strong points, severely disrupting the attempted Soviet armored and cavalry exploitation. After noon Colonel Arman's 6th Tank Corps, attacking in brigade columns of about 50 tanks each with infantry riding on the tanks, lunged between and, in some cases, over the German strong point defenses, followed on horseback by the troopers of 2d Guards Cavalry Corps. The German fortified village defenses atomized the Soviet attack into fragments. Nevertheless, three of Colonel Arman's brigades ran the gauntlet and crossed the vital Rzhev-Sychevka road, while one could not.<sup>32</sup> General Kriukov's more fragile

cavalry suffered frightening losses as elements of three of his divisions raced through withering German fire across the road into the German rear, leaving the corps headquarters and logistical trains isolated in the small bridgehead far to the rear. The Germans responded by counterattacking from north and south along the Rzhev-Sychevka road against the exposed flanks of the exploiting Soviet forces. <sup>33</sup> All the while, reinforced Soviet infantry struggled painfully to expand the bridgehead against undiminished German resistance.

A German eyewitness account captured the ferocity of the action, writing that the the commander of the 78th Infantry Division's 215th Grenadier Regiment:

...was ordered to gather all of the units in the threatened sector into one combat group under his command, to close the gap, and, while ignoring the enemy who had already broken through, to prevent further breakthroughs. In his sector, [he] was able to assemble around him, in a blocking position at Lopotok, the division training company and whatever assault guns and stragglers were available. As he was organizing them, about five cossack squadrons galloped down upon them, trying to break out to the southeast. Everyone who had a weapon, whether infantryman, artilleryman, and even the assault guns and a light battery, engaged them in direct fire. By chance, a Ju-88 was circling over the village, discovered the Russians, and joined in battle with its bombs and on-board weapons. All of the Cossacks were killed by this conglomerate of fire...After this episode...he formed three sectors out of splinter groups and stragglers and actually succeeded in closing the gap and repulsing all attacks. <sup>34</sup>

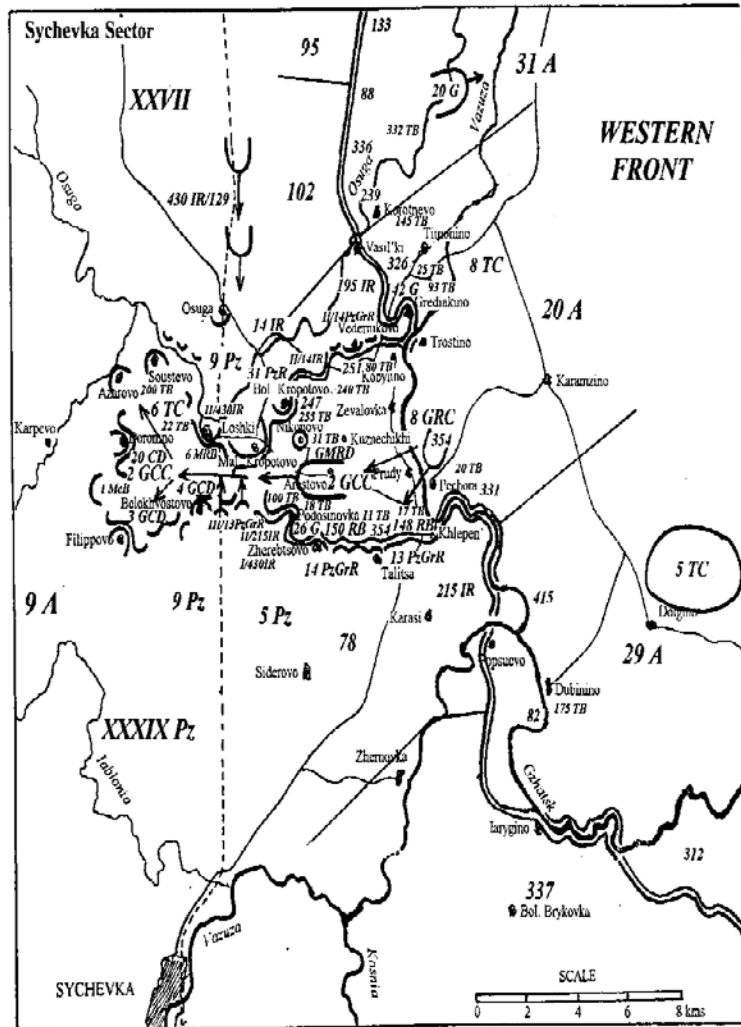
A Soviet account laconically confirmed the terrible carnage:

The commander of the 2d Guards Cavalry Corps was not able to assign his divisions' penetration missions in timely fashion on 28 November and did not provide for their timely commitment into combat. Having received its mission in timely fashion and, while operating skillfully and decisively, two regiments of the 20th Cavalry Division successfully penetrated between enemy strong points, but, having been cut off from the main force, the third regiment was unsuccessful and suffered heavy losses.

Having received its penetration order two hours after the 20th Cavalry Division, the 3d Guards Cavalry Division attacked an already prepared and alerted enemy, fell under his concentrated cross-fire, and suffered heavy losses, including almost all of its artillery and the entire 10th Guards Cavalry Regiment. <sup>35</sup>

In two days of fierce fighting, the 5th Panzer Division had suffered over 500 casualties, and the 78th Infantry Division reported, "All units severely weakened and great losses in equipment and weapons." <sup>36</sup> The cost to the Russians was obviously higher, for the Germans counted at least 50 destroyed Russian tanks, and the snow-covered fields in front of their positions were littered with brown-and white-clad Russian dead.

By nightfall on 28 November, it was clear to all that the Soviet attack had faltered (see Map 4). Although the bulk of Colonel Arman's tank corps and three of General Kriukov's cavalry divisions had reached the forests across the Rzhev-Sychevka road, the attrition in armor and cavalry had been staggering, and German counterattacks along the Rzhev road had slammed the door on their withdrawal. Worse still, the exploiting tankers and cavalymen were no longer within the range of supporting artillery, since there was no room for it in the bridgehead.<sup>37</sup> Zhukov and Konev, however, remained undeterred. They ordered their beleaguered tankers to organize a breakout to the west during the night of 28-29 November,



Map 4 - Situation in the Sychevka sector, 28 November 1942.

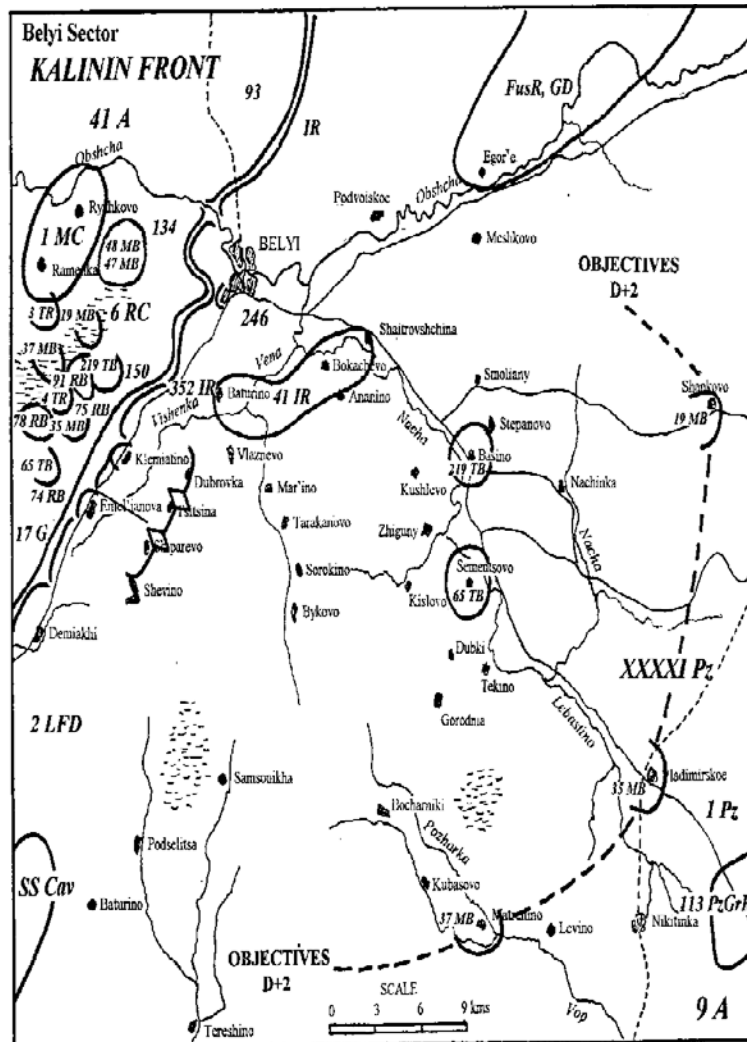
while exhorting their forces in the bridgehead both to support the breakout and widen the breach in German lines. Zhukov's continued grim optimism was conditioned, in part, by his stubborn refusal to admit defeat and by the striking success Soviet forces seemed to be achieving to the west.

There, in the Belyi and Luchesa River sectors along the western flank of the Rzhev salient, Major General F. G. Tarasov's 41st and Major General V. A. Iushkevich's 22d Armies had made striking progress in the first three days of battle and appeared close to reaching deep into the defending Germans' rear area. Once they had done so, thought Zhukov, the temporary difficulties along the Vazusa River would become irrelevant. The 90,000 men and over 300 tanks of General Tarasov's 41st Army struck at 0900 hours on 25 November after an artillery preparation had smashed German forward defenses south of the fortified town of Belyi (see Map 5).<sup>38</sup> Advancing in a driving snowstorm across the frozen, forested, and snow-covered swamps into the more open terrain along the main Belyi-Dukhovshchina dirt road which traversed the western flank of the salient,

the riflemen of Major General I. I. Popov's 6th Stalin Volunteer Rifle Corps, supported by tank detachments from General M. D. Solomatin's 1st Mechanized Corps, easily overcame forward German defenses and lunged into the villages along the road and Vishenka

River in the German tactical rear area.<sup>39</sup>

Heartened by the first day's successes, at dawn the next day, General Tarasov ordered his entire mechanized corps into action. Marching in brigade column with his 65th and 219th Tank Brigades in the lead, the 15,200 man and 224 tank-strong 1st Mechanized Corps,



**Map 5** - Planning and Dispositions the Belyi sector, 24 November 1942.

by the experienced General M. A. Solomatin, made spectacular initial progress.<sup>40</sup> Moving painfully through the heavy and virtually roadless forests, by nightfall General Solomatin's tank force had torn a hole 20 kilometers wide and nearly 30 kilometers deep in the German defenses. His lead brigades proudly announced their arrival along the Belyi-Vladimirskoe road astride vital German communications routes into Belyi.<sup>41</sup> Solomatin later described the difficult advance, writing:

There were no roads which would permit free movement of transport vehicles. The enemy had destroyed all bridges during his withdrawal. The deep snow cover and poor visibility in the falling snow strongly inhibited movement. The corps had no special vehicles for clearing snowdrifts and



constructing column routes. We employed T-34 tanks for that purpose. They traveled in echelon, one after the other, so as to blaze a trail for the infantry vehicles and the towed artillery. In some instances motorized infantry followed the tanks on foot, which exhausted them and limited any form of combat maneuver.

The absence of roads, the dense forest, and the poor visibility in snowfall made orientation on the ground difficult. The tank subunits, especially those in the lead, collided with one another. Advancing units often found themselves on the routes of their neighbor, which made it exceedingly difficult to control the force and slowed the rate of advance.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the difficulty encountered in keeping some sort of order during the advance through the forest depths, Solomatin's tank brigades succeeded in reaching the key communications road linking Belyi with the German rear area.

The German XXXXI Panzer Corps intelligence report that evening recognized the gravity of the situation, accurately noting:

The Red Army... broke through in the sector of the 352d Grenadier Regiment...on a front of 15-20 kilometers wide and to a depth of 30-40 kilometers. The first assault wave consisted of 22 Red infantry battalions, supported by up to 100 T-34 tanks. About 24 infantry battalions followed, supported by another 200 tanks to enlarge the breakthrough to the east and to tie up German forces on the autobahn.<sup>43</sup>

The further news that "another 20 Red battalions and 100 tanks were attacking further north in the Lushesa valley," prompted a German commander to note that, "The situation in the Szytschewka-Rzhew-Belyi area was exciting enough."<sup>44</sup>

Despite General Solomatin's seemingly dramatic success, the attack plans of General Tarasov's 41st Army almost immediately went awry. Although ordered to avoid a prolonged struggle for the city of Belyi, Tarasov was inexorably drawn to the enticing target. The success of the initial Soviet assault seemed to indicate that Belyi was available for the taking.<sup>45</sup> Drawn like a magnet to the city, Tarasov first committed Colonel N. O. Gruz's 150th Rifle Division against the city's southern defenses, and, when they did not prevail, he reinforced Gruz's division with a mechanized brigade from Solomatin's exploiting mechanized corps.<sup>46</sup> Despite Tarasov's exertions and fierce fighting on the southern approaches to the city, Belyi could not be taken.

The credit for defending Belyi belonged to the commander of German XXXXI Panzer Corps, Colonel General Joseph Harpe, who decided to hold the city and relied on fate, luck, and anticipated German operational reserves to save the situation in the German rear.<sup>47</sup> Harpe directed the infantry of his 246th Infantry Division to establish a strong point defense south of the city. He then requested and received a *kampfgruppe* each from Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland* and 1st Panzer Division, which were located in reserve positions northeast and southwest of Belyi, respectively. Racing forward across the frozen snow-covered roads, 1st Panzer Division's *Kampfgruppe* von Weitersheim reached Belyi on late morning of 26 November, and *Grossdeutschland*

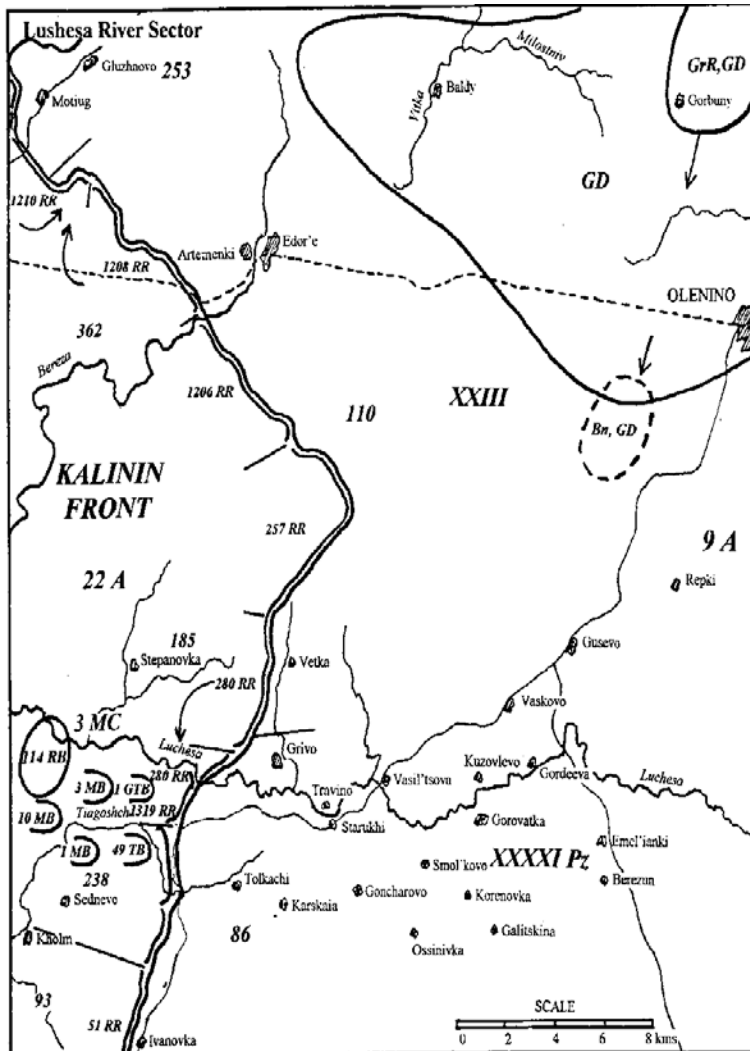


Division's *Kampfgruppe* Kassnitz arrived several hours later.<sup>48</sup> Together, the two groups began a bloody, but successful struggle to hold the city.

Meanwhile, an increasingly frustrated General Solomatin attempted to sever the crucial Belyi-Vladimirskoe road running northwest into Belyi, which was the only available German resupply route into the city.<sup>49</sup> Now opposed by company and battalion combat groups from 1st Panzer Division, which were deployed along and forward of the critical supply artery, Solomatin urgently asked Tarasov to reinforce his flagging attack with two mechanized brigades in army reserve.<sup>50</sup> However, after demurring for a day, on 28 November Tarasov denied Solomatin's request and instead committed his two reserve brigades to the battle for Belyi. Colonel I. F. Dremov's fresh 47th Mechanized Brigade attacked northward east of Belyi in yet another attempt to envelop the city. Although Dremov's brigade severed the Belyi-Vladimirovka road, it ended up unsupported in an exposed position northeast of the city.<sup>51</sup> All the while, Solomatin's overextended mechanized force fought a bitter day-long struggle along a 30 kilometer sector of the key Belyi-Vladimirovskoe road. Solomatin's frustration increased when, on 29 November, his forward forces announced the arrival of fresh German armored reserves. Solomatin then knew what Tarasov did not. The fortunes of battle were clearly turning, and initial Soviet success had been squandered in the futile battle for Belyi. Consequently, Solomatin consolidated his positions, went over to the defense, and awaited the German counterstroke, which he knew was inevitable (see Map 6).



Rifle Division and two regiments of Colonel M. F. Andriushenko's 185th Rifle Division, supported by a tank brigade of General Katukov's mechanized corps. The combined force routed a regiment of the German 86th Infantry Division and punctured the German front at the junction of the XXXXI Panzer Corps' 86th Infantry and the XXIII Army Corps' 110th Infantry Division. During the next two days Iushkevich committed Katukov's full corps and drove German forces further up the valley.



Map 7 - Dispositions in the Luchesa River sector on 24 November 1942

The German XXIII Army Corps responded by committing *Grossdeutschland* Division's Grenadier Regiment into the fray to slow the Soviet advance.<sup>53</sup> Heavy fighting raged for possession of the key village of Starukhi as Soviet forces drove inexorably toward the Olenino-Belyi road in an attempt to support 41st Army's advance further south. Although the Germans were unable to close the yawning gap created by 22d Army's attack, the often impenetrable terrain, deteriorating weather, and skillful German defense took a heavy toll on the advancing Soviets and halted them short of their goal. By 30 November the Soviets occupied a salient 8 kilometers wide and almost 15 kilometers deep in the German defenses. But, try as they did, Iushkevich's army could not overcome German resistance and reach the key Olenino-Belyi road.<sup>54</sup>

A German participant later recorded the ferocity of the fighting, stating, "It was indescribable, what the infantrymen, engineers, the artillerymen, and the forward observers had to endure in the snow and ice of the forward combat line. Alert units had to be formed from convoy and supply units to close some of the developing gaps."<sup>55</sup> Another remarked, "There were attacks everywhere!. Crises rose by the hours!."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the German defenses bent but did not break.

The tense situation along the Luchesa River was only exacerbated by unrelenting Soviet pressure against the northern extremity of the German Rzhev salient. There, on a broad

front along the Molodoi Tud River, on 25 November the 80,000 men and over 200 tanks of Major General A. I. Zygin's Soviet 39th Army launched Zhukov's secondary attack with three rifle divisions and several rifle brigades, supported by two tank brigades and three separate tank regiments (see Map 8).<sup>57</sup> Since Zygin's attack was intended to be secondary, he was unable to exploit several opportunities for success which arose on the first day of combat.<sup>58</sup> Although Soviet forces achieved some initial success in the snow-covered, rolling, and partially wooded countryside, they were unable to exploit it because of skillful action by German tactical reserves from the 14th Motorized Division and the *Grossdeutschland* Division's Grenadier Regiment.

By 30 November this struggle too had degenerated into a series of grinding Soviet attacks, which achieved only limited gains. The German XXIII Army Corps' defending 206th Infantry and 14th Motorized Divisions were forced to conduct some tactical withdrawals but, nevertheless, maintained a continuous defense line, which denied General Zygin's forces access to their objective, the Olenino-Rzhev road and rail line. Zhukov, Konev, and Purkaev alternated between elation and frustration over the results of the first five days of operations. The Western Front's main attack in the Sychevka sector had clearly faltered. Although 20th Army's infantry had secured a foothold over the Vazusa River and its mobile forces occupied precarious positions astride the critical Rzhev-Sychevka road, the 31st Army's attack had utterly failed, and the 29th Army had not yet joined the assault. Nevertheless, both the 41st and 22d Armies had made significant gains, and Konev still had significant reserves, including the almost 200 tanks of the 5th Tank Corps, which he could commit in the 20th Army's sector. Consequently, on Zhukov's instructions Konev reinforced the 20th Army with the 31st Army reserve divisions and ordered Kiriukhin to withdraw his exploiting armor and cavalry from their exposed position west of the Rzhev-Sychevka road. After regrouping, Kiriukhin was to continue his assault. Meanwhile, General Purkaev's two Kalinin Front armies west of the Rzhev salient would develop their attacks in support of the 20th Army. What Zhukov did not know was that the German command was preparing to strike back in the very sector where Zhukov's forces had achieved their greatest success.

Having failed to exploit their opportunities west of the Rzhev-Sychevka road and now starved of ammunition and logistical support, Colonel Arman's 6th Tank Corps and cooperating cavalry had no choice but to attempt a breakout to the east. On the night of 29-30 November, the force launched a desperate breakout attempt in coordination with fierce Soviet attacks from within the Vazusa River bridgehead (see Map 9). In bitter and chaotic fighting which cost Arman nearly all of his remaining 100 tanks, the bulk of the corps' personnel broke out of encirclement.<sup>59</sup> The more fragile cavalry fared even worse and were mercilessly

A German eyewitness of the costly breakout recorded that, at day's end, "The battlefield was spotted with dead and wounded, a view which the oldest veteran cannot forget."<sup>61</sup> The Soviet 6th Tank Corps commander reported, "Tens of our soldiers suffered heroic deaths in this heavy combat, among whom were the commanders of the 200th Tank Brigade and 6th Motorized Rifle Brigade...who died leading the attack."<sup>62</sup> The intense combat took its toll on the Germans, as described by a 5th Panzer Division participant, who wrote:

**Molodot Tud Sector KALININ FRONT**

**39 A**

**348**

**373**

**135**

**396 RR**

**1235 RR**

**1237 RR**

**41 TB**

**497 RR**

**28 TB**

**158**

**879 RR**

**881 RR**

**875 KK**

**117 RB**

**1239 RR**

**MOLODOU TUD**

**312 IR**

**186**

**298 RR**

**100 RB**

**473 IR**

**253**

**186 RR**

**46 MB**

**30 A**

**178**

**101 RB**

**136 RB**

**32 TB**

**693 RR**

**451 IR**

**471 IR**

**251**

**130 RB**

**11 GrR**

**14 Mot**

**53 GrR**

**9 A**

**XXIII**

**GD**

**OLENINO**

**Chertolino**

**Zvagin**

**Volga**

**Orel**

**Obolodna**

**Trouna**

**Kazakovo**

**Palutskino**

**Mail. Brodnika**

**Bortniki**

**301 IR**

**Brinkhuzovo**

**Lasino**

**206**

**Urdom**

**Tilitsa**

**Zartsevo**

**Trushkovo**

**709 RR**

**28 TB**

**39 TB**

**101 RB**

**136 RB**

**32 TB**

**693 RR**

**451 IR**

**471 IR**

**251**

**130 RB**

**11 GrR**

**14 Mot**

**53 GrR**

**9 A**

**XXIII**

**GD**

**OLENINO**

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**Zartsevo**

**Trushkovo**

**709 RR**

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**101 RB**

**136 RB**

**32 TB**

**693 RR**

**451 IR**

**471 IR**

**251**

**130 RB**

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**Urdom**

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**Zartsevo**

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**709 RR**

**28 TB**

**39 TB**

**101 RB**

**136 RB**

**32 TB**

**693 RR**

**451 IR**

**471 IR**

**251**

**130 RB**

**11 GrR**

**14 Mot**

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**9 A**

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**Map 8 - Dispositions in the Molodoi Tud sector on 24 November 1942**

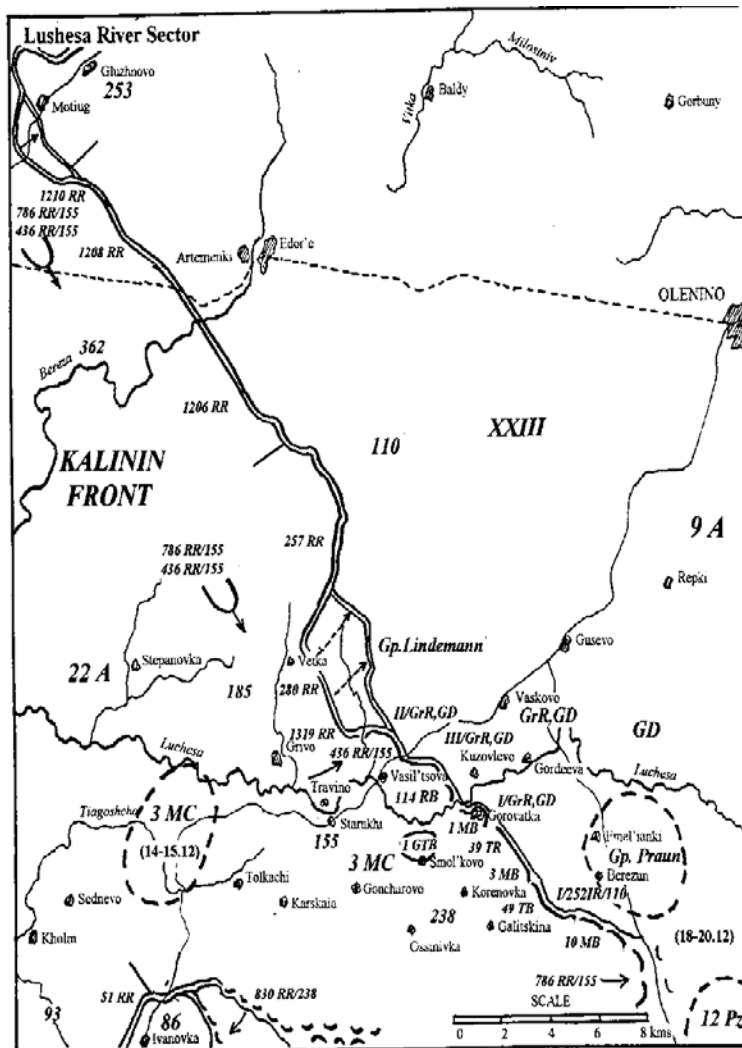








Zhukov ordered the 20th and 29th Armies to resume their assaults on 11 December in concert with a fresh drive in the north by General Zygin's 39th Army, which he reinforced with a stream of divisions from the 30th Army in the Rzhev sector.



Map 11 - Situation in the Luchesa River sector from 3-11 December 1942.

The new act in the developing drama began playing out in the Vazusa River bridgehead on the morning of 11 December. At 1010 hours massed Soviet infantry from the 20th and 29th Armies, supported by all remaining infantry support tanks, resumed their attacks from and south of the Vazusa River bridgehead (see Map 12). Despite withering German fire, Konev and Kiriukhin committed the almost 350 tanks and 20,000 men of his new 5th and refurbished 6th Tank Corps into combat. So hastily organized was the attack that many of the new tanks had not received their coat of white camouflage paint. Attacking with abandon across a 4-kilometer sector into the teeth of reinforced German antitank defenses, the desperate assault cost Soviet 20th Army about 300 tanks lost in 2 days of

incessant and deadly combat.<sup>68</sup> A Soviet 5th Tank Corps account captured the grim and futile nature of the combat:

A rocket rising into the air signaled the attack. All those around came to life. The cries of "Forward!" and "For the Fatherland!" resounded across the field. It was 1010 hours on 11 December 1942. The first to rush forward were the regiments of the 20th Army's 243d and 247th Rifle Divisions. Soon, however, their forward ranks were forced to take cover against the heavy enemy fire. A fierce, bloody battle began, which lasted all day.

The attack misfired almost along the entire extent of the penetration front. Then, the brigades of the 5th Tank Corps were committed into battle. They





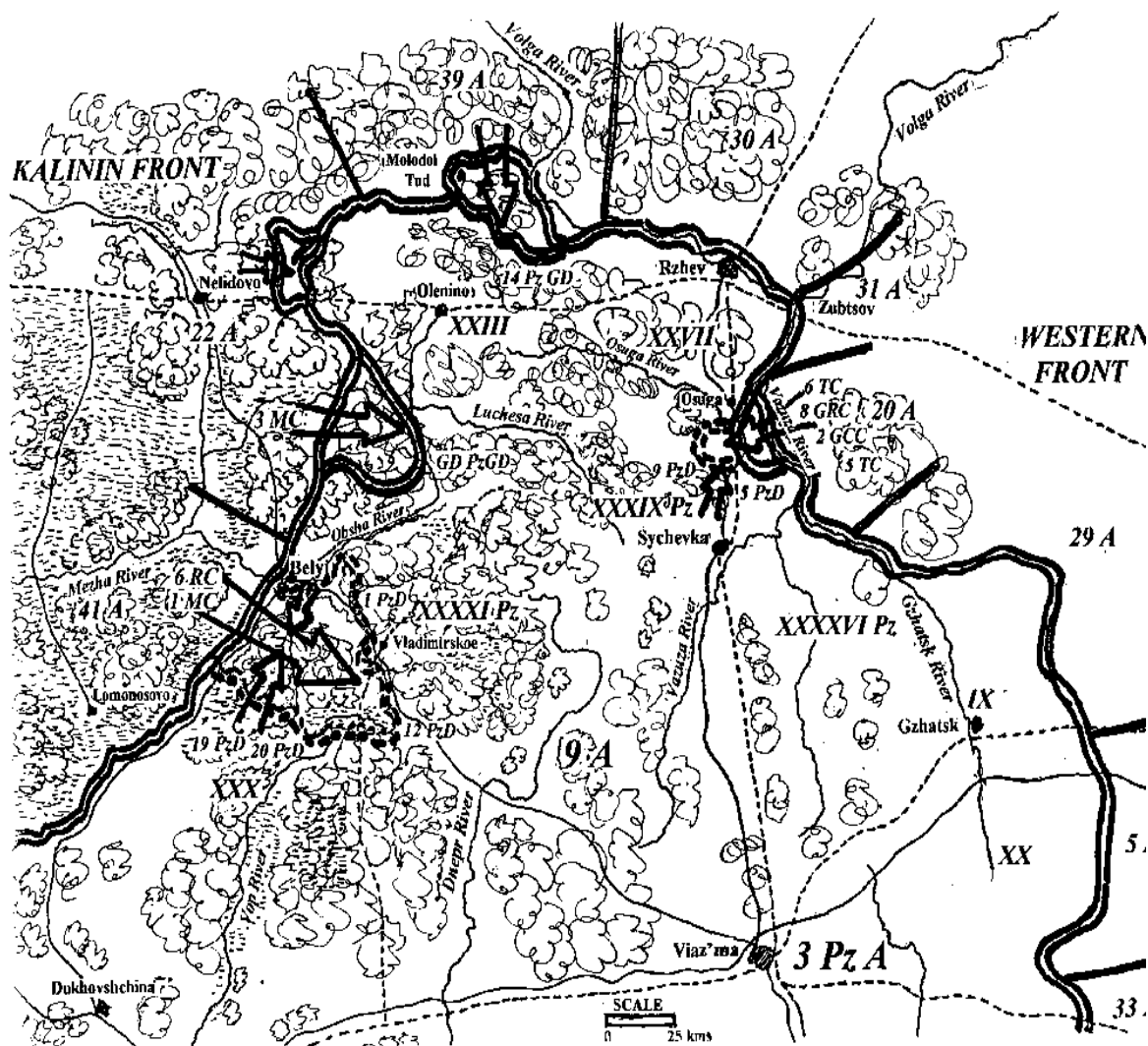
Legacy

### Zhukov conducted Operation

ing " While causing catastrophic







Map 15 - Summary of Operation Mars.

Operation Mars cost the Red Army nearly half a million men killed, wounded, or captured. Individual Soviet combat units were decimated in the operation. The Soviet 20th Army lost 58,524 men out of its original strength of over 114,000 men.<sup>72</sup> General Solomatin's 1st Mechanized Corps lost 8,100 of its 12,000 men and all of its 220 tanks, and the accompanying 6th Stalin Rifle Corps lost over 20,000 of its 30,000 men.<sup>73</sup> At lower levels the cost was even higher. The 8th Guards Rifle Corp's 26th Guards Rifle Division emerged from combat with 500 of its over 7,000 combat infantrymen intact, while the 4,500 man 148th and 150th Rifle Brigades had only 27 and 110 "fighters," respectively, available at the end of the operation.<sup>74</sup> Soviet tank losses, correctly estimated by the Germans as around 1,700, were equally staggering, in as much as they exceeded the total number of tanks the Soviets initially committed in Operation Uranus at Stalingrad.<sup>75</sup> In Western armies losses such as these would have prompted the removal of senior commanders, if not worse. In the Red Army it did not, for when all was said and done, Zhukov fought, and the Red Army needed fighters.



Although far less severe than those of the Soviets, the Germans too suffered grievous losses in the operation, losses which they could ill afford given their smaller manpower pool and the catastrophe befalling them at Stalingrad. For example, the 1st Panzer Division suffered 1,793 casualties, and the 5th Panzer 1,640, while losses in the infantry divisions (the 78th, 246th, 86th, 110th, and 206th) along the Soviet main attack axes were even greater.<sup>76</sup> The overall Soviet casualty toll, however, was at least 10-fold greater than the total German loss of around 40,000 men.

Zhukov said little about the defeat on his memoirs, and what he did say was grossly distorted. He mentioned only the December operation, and, without revealing its code name, he called it simply a diversion for the Operation Uranus. Among the many thousands of Soviet memoirs and unit histories, only a handful mention the operation, and these do so without revealing its full scope. Even formerly classified accounts avoid covering the operation in its entirety. Archival materials, however, do cover the operation in greater detail, but only in selective sectors.

In assessing blame for the failure, none of the few available Soviet accounts mention the role of key commanders such as Zhukov or Konev. For example, General Getman, commander of the 6th Tank Corps, who was ill in November and did not participate in the attack, wrote:

The offensive was conducted against fortified positions occupied by enemy tank forces and in swampy-forested terrain in complex and unfavorable weather conditions. These and other conditions favored the enemy. We lacked the required coordination with the infantry and reliable artillery and aviation support. The organized suppression of enemy strong points was inadequate, especially his antitank means by artillery fire and aviation strikes. This led to the tank brigades suffering great losses.<sup>77</sup>

Other formerly classified Soviet sources and archival materials candidly critiqued the problems, and German reports echoed those critiques. A 15 December German Ninth Army report judged that the Russian operation had sustained a heavy defeat and "bled itself out," adding:

The enemy leadership, which demonstrated skill and adaptability in the preparation and initial implementation of the offensive,...once again displayed its old weaknesses as the operation progressed. Indeed, the enemy has learned much, but he has again shown himself to be unable to exploit critical unfavorable situations. The picture repeats itself when operations which began with great intent and local successes degenerated into senseless, wild hammering at fixed front-line positions once they encounter initial heavy losses and unforeseen situations. This incomprehensible phenomenon appears again and again. But, even in extremis, the Russian is never logical; he falls back on his natural instinct, and the nature of the Russian is to use mass, steamroller tactics, and adherence to given objectives without regard to changing situations.<sup>78</sup>

The manner in which Operation Mars was fought and the carnage the operation produced has few parallels in the later war years. In its grisly form, its closest peer was the famous Soviet frontal assault on the Zeelow Heights during the April 1945 Berlin operation. Not

coincidentally, it too was orchestrated by Zhukov. Unlike the case in 1942, however, the victorious conclusion of the Berlin operation required no alteration of the historical record to preserve Soviet pride or commanders' reputations.

The legacy of Operation Mars was silence. Stalin and history mandated that Vasilevsky's feat at Stalingrad remained unblemished by the Rzhev failure. Stalin recognized Zhukov's greatest quality -- that he fought -- and, at this stage of the war and later, Stalin needed fighters. Therefore, Zhukov's reputation remained intact. Stalin and Soviet history mandated that he share credit with Vasilevsky for the Stalingrad victory. Zhukov gained a measure of revenge over German Army Group Center at Kursk in summer 1943 and in Belorussia in summer 1944. Ironically, however, it would be Vasilevsky who, as key *Stavka* planner, would play an instrumental role in finally crushing that German Army Group in East Prussia in January 1945. Such is the fickleness of history.

Soviet military history ignored other notable Soviet defeats during the later war years. Among those notable operations, which, like Mars, endured obscurity and silence, were the failed Soviet Central Front offensive of February-March 1943 in the region west of Kursk, the abortive Soviet Belorussian offensive of fall 1943, and futile Soviet attempts to invade Rumania in May 1944 and East Prussia in fall 1944. This silence was possible because each of these defeats occurred at the end of a major Soviet strategic advance, when victorious context masked the failure to vanquished Germans and history alike and shrouded the events in a cloak of anonymity, which has endured for more than fifty years. That cloak is finally being lifted.

#### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> The only exception to this victorious mosaic was von Manstein's famous February-March 1943 counterstroke in the Donbas and Khar'kov regions, which ended the Soviet's post-Stalingrad westward march and which set the stage for the Battle of Kursk. [BACK](#)

<sup>2</sup> For a partial listing of forgotten operations, see, David M. Glantz, "The Failures of Historiography: Forgotten Battles of the German-Soviet War (1941-1945)," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1995), 768-808. Published in the Russian Federation as David M. Glantz, "Nedostatki istoriografii: zabytye bitvy germano-sovetskoi voyny (1941-1945 gg.)" [The shortcomings of historiography: forgotten battles of the German-Soviet War (1941-1945)]. in *Vtoraia mirovaia voina: Aktual'nye problemy* [The Second World War: Actual problems], (Moscow: "Nauka," 1995), 339-361. [BACK](#)

<sup>3</sup> Other glaring instances of flaws in the historical record during the period 1943 through 1945 include the failed Soviet Central Front offensive westward from Kursk in February-March 1943, the abortive Soviet Belorussian offensive of fall 1943, and the defeated Soviet attempt to invade East Prussia in fall 1944. [BACK](#)

<sup>4</sup> Existing Soviet accounts, including Zhukov's memoirs, obfuscate when Operation Uranus was planned by stating that planning for the Stalingrad and associated operations occurred in late October and early November. It is now clear that both Operation Mars and Uranus were planned in late September. [BACK](#)

<sup>5</sup>. Zhukov's memoirs distort both the calendar of events in fall 1942 and his role in and the course of Operation Mars. He mentions the operation but covers up its timing, purpose, course, and consequences. For an accurate account of Zhukov's complete wartime itinerary, including the vital period of fall 1942, see S. I. Isaev, *Vekhi frontovogo puti* [Landmarks of a front path], *VIZh*, No. 10 (October 1991), 22-25. This calendar of Zhukov's travels shows that he spent the bulk of this critical fall period with the Western and Kalinin Fronts. All subsequent references in this article to Zhukov's activities accord with his actual work itinerary. [BACK](#)

<sup>6</sup>. Zhukov's force of over 57,000 men lost over 23,000 in the Khalkhin Gol operation, including nearly 9,000 dead and missing. For details see G. F. Krivosheev, *Grif sekretnosti niat: poteri vooruzhennykh sil SSSR v voynakh, boevykh deistviyakh, i voennykh konfliktakh* [Classification secret removed: losses of the armed forces of the USSR in wars, military actions, and military conflicts], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), 76-84. For details on Zhukov's performance at Khalkhan Gol and his crude combat style, see Petro G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 105-110. [BACK](#)

<sup>7</sup>. The July-August 1942 Rzhev operation, formally named the Pogoreloe-Gorodishche Operation, was conducted by the 20th and 31st Armies of Zhukov's Western Front and the 29th and 30th Armies of Konev's Kalinin Front. The partial successes achieved in the operation indicated to Zhukov what another better prepared and more powerful operation could achieve. It also prompted the *Stavka* to appoint Zhukov to coordinate future operations of both *fronts* against the Rzhev salient. [BACK](#)

<sup>8</sup>. At the beginning of war, Zhukov had advocated a "southern" strategy be adopted, in which the Red Army would commit its most powerful forces in the south where strategic decision could be reached. This strategy reflected Zhukov's prior service in the Kiev Special Military District and his role in drafting prewar Soviet defense plans while he was serving as Chief of the General Staff. Zhukov converted to a "northern" strategy after his experiences at Moscow in winter 1941-1942 and strenuously argued that point of view during spring 1942. See David M. Glantz, *The Anatomy of a Military Disaster: The Soviet Khar'kov Operation (May 1942)*, forthcoming in 1997 from the Ian Allen (London) and Sarpedon (New York) Presses. [BACK](#)

<sup>9</sup>. The forces of the Kalinin and Western Fronts, together with the Moscow Defense Zone, comprised 31 percent of the manpower, 32 percent of the artillery, almost 50 percent of the armor, and over 35 percent of the total Soviet Armed Forces' strength. These forces were concentrated along only 17 percent of the overall front [BACK](#)

<sup>10</sup>. These Soviet strength figures appear in A. A. Grechko, chief ed., *Istoriia vtoroi mirovoi voyny 1939-1945, tom shestoi* [A history of the Second World War, Volume six] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), 34-35. German intelligence records generally substantiate the relative strengths. [BACK](#)

<sup>11</sup>. *Stavka* reserves available to Zhukov's two *fronts* included an imposing array of tank, mechanized, and cavalry corps (the 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 10th Tank, the 1st, 2d, and 3d

Mechanized, and the 2d Guards Cavalry), the superbly refitted tank army of Lieutenant General P. S. Rybalko, then in Western Front reserve west of Kaluga, the 2d Guards Army and associated 2d Guards Mechanized Corps in the process of forming in the Tambov region midway between Moscow and Stalingrad; the 2d Reserve Army in the Vologda region; the 3d Reserve Army near Kalinin; and the 10th Reserve Army in the Volga Military District. While the three reserve armies would not be fit to take the field until late November and December, the *Stavka* considered them capable of supporting either Operation Mars or Uranus. The most ready of the armies, Lieutenant General R. Ia. Malinovsky's powerful 2d Guards, was positioned to participate in the later stages of either operation. In addition, the *Stavka* had the refitted 6th Mechanized Corps in the Moscow Defense Zone, the fresh 7th and 24th Tank Corps in reserve in the south, as well as the 2d and 23d Tank Corps, which was assigned to the Volga Military District near Stalingrad. See *Boevoi sostav sovetskoi armii, chast 2* [Combat composition of the Soviet Army, Part 2], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1972). Classified secret, but now declassified. Prepared by the General Staff's Military-scientific Directorate. [BACK](#)

<sup>12</sup>. Vasilevsky remained one of Stalin's most trusted generals and advisers throughout the war. He completed the war as Stalin's theater commander in the Far East, where in August 1945 he organized and led the Soviet offensive against Japanese forces in Manchuria. In terms of his performance, Vasilevsky emerged from the war as the Soviet Union's finest general, a fact which history has also tended to obscure. As was the custom, all *Stavka* members participated in the planning of both operations. As Deputy Supreme Commander, Zhukov did so as well, which later permitted him to share in the glory of the Stalingrad victory. [BACK](#)

<sup>13</sup>. The Soviet 5th Army consisted of 6 rifle divisions, 4 rifle brigades, 2 tank brigades, and 9 artillery regiments, while the 33d Army included the 7th Guards Rifle Corps, 8 rifle divisions, 4 rifle brigades, a ski brigade, 3 tank brigades, and 5 artillery regiments. Both armies were far stronger than the other *front* armies, except the armies conducting the main attacks in Operation Mars. See *Boevoi sostav*, 211-212. [BACK](#)

<sup>14</sup>. The Soviets understood that two Rumanian armies and a portion of German Fourth Panzer Army was supporting German Sixth Army operations around Stalingrad. [BACK](#)

<sup>15</sup>. Ultimately, Operation Saturn was truncated into Operation Little Saturn because German resistance at Stalingrad was stronger than anticipated. In Operation Little Saturn, the *Stavka* sought to destroy Italian and German forces along the Don River rather than reach deep to Rostov on the Sea of Azov. [BACK](#)

<sup>16</sup>. For the contents of the Western Front directive, see *Tsentral'nyi arkhiv ministerstva oborony* {Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense}, abbreviated *TsAMO*, Fond 386, Opis 8583, Ed. Khr. [individual custody] 144, List [page] 8. All archival references hereafter cited as *TsAMO*, with appropriate fond (F.), opis (Op.), delo (D.), and page (L.). [BACK](#)

<sup>17</sup>. Late on 26 September, the *Stavka* planners adjourned their sessions and returned to their respective *front* sectors to coordinate planning with *front* commanders and staffs.

After surveying the latest conditions in the south, Zhukov intended to rejoin his Western and Kalinin Fronts on 12 October, the initial date set for the launch of Operation Mars. However, bad weather delayed the preparations for Mars, and, instead of rejoining his *fronts*, on 12 October Zhukov returned to Moscow to finalize plans for the operation's first phase, now rescheduled for 28 October. On 21 October, while Zhukov traveled to the Kalinin Front to finalize attack preparations, the General Staff prepared final orders and dispatched them to the respective *fronts*.

[BACK](#)

<sup>18</sup>. For a full explanation of the Soviet operational concept, see "Vvod v proryv konno-mekhanizirovannykh grupp" [Introduction into the penetration of a cavalry-mechanized group], *Sbornik materialov po izucheniiu opyta voiny*, No. 9 (noiabr'-dekabr' 1943 g.) [Collections of materials for the study of war experience, No. 9 (November-December 1943)] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1944), 135-139. This classified study of the operations of the 20th Army's mobile group was prepared by the Red Army General Staff's Section for the Exploitation of War Experience. Hereafter cited as *SMPIOV*, with appropriate page.

[BACK](#)

<sup>19</sup>. For a description of the 41st Army's mission within the context of Kalinin Front operations, see M. D. Solomatin, *Krasnogradtsy* [The men of Krasnograd] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1963), 11-13, and "Boevye donoseniia I operativnye svodki shtaba 1 mekhkorpusa" [Combat reports and operational summaries of the 1st Mechanized Corps], *TsAMO*, F. 3424, Op. 1. D. 2, L. 31. Solomatin's work contains a thorough and generally accurate account of 1st Mechanized and 6th Rifle Corps operations. Less detailed descriptions of the missions of the 22d and 39th Armies are found in M. E. Katukov, *Na ostrie glavnogo udara* [On the point of the main attack] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), 182-183 and K. A. Malygin, *V tsentre boevogo poriadka* [In the center of the combat formation], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1986), 69-70. [BACK](#)

<sup>20</sup>. While no Soviet documents refer specifically to Operation Jupiter, Soviet force concentrations clearly indicate the *Stavka* intended to conduct the follow-on operation. Given the names assigned to the other operations, it is likely it was designated either Jupiter or Neptune. [BACK](#)

<sup>21</sup>. No Soviet sources, open or classified, mention specific plans for Operation Jupiter. German Ninth Army records, however, document the major build-up of forces in the sectors of the 5th and 33d Armies during October and November 1942. Soviet archival sources confirm this major build-up. In addition to the resubordination of the 3d Tank Army to the Western Front in October and its positioning east of Viaz'ma, the 9th and 10th Tank Corps were positioned to the rear of the 5th and 33d Armies. According to "Prikazy 10-mu TK s 13.5 po 27.12.42" [Orders to the 10th Tank Corps from 13.5 through 27.12.42], *TsAMO*, F. 3404, Op. 1, D. 1, L. 225, at 1800 hours on 13 November 1942, the 10th Tank Corps was shifted from the *Stavka* reserve to Western Front control. Subsequent reports document its deployment into the 5th Army's sector. *Boevoe sostav, chast 2*, 190-91, 211-12, 235-36, records the reinforcement of the 5th Army with the 30th



Guards, 78th, 194th, and 379th Rifle Divisions and both the 5th and 33d Armies with heavy amounts of supporting artillery. [BACK](#)

<sup>22.</sup> *Stavka* support for the Western and Kalinin Fronts included 31 tank brigades and 12 tank regiments, totaling 2,352 tanks, over 54 artillery regiments, 30 guards mortar battalions, and 23 antitank regiments with almost 10,000 guns and mortars, and 20 separate engineer and sapper battalions. This support included one of the newly fielded separate heavy guards mortar regiments (heavy *Katyushas* or "Stalin organs") and 18 separate heavy guards mortar battalions. See *Boevoi sostav*, 211-212. [BACK](#)

<sup>23.</sup> "Prikazy 8Gv SK, sentiabr-dekabr' 42g." [Orders of the 8th Guards Rifle Corps, September-December 1942], *TsAMO*, F. 825, Op. 1, D. 11, L. 98, [BACK](#)

<sup>24.</sup> For offensive details, see *SMPIOV*, No. 9, 141-150, A. L. Getman, *Tanki idut na Berlin (1941-1945)* [Tanks are advancing on Berlin], (Moscow: "Nauka," 1973), 70-76, and P. G. Kuznetsov, *Gvardeitsy-moskvichi* [Moscow guardsmen], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1962), 185-190. These are the official combat histories of the 6th Tank Corps and the 1st Guards Motorized Division. [BACK](#)

<sup>25.</sup> For German accounts of the operation along the Vazusa River, see H. Grossman, *Rzhev: The Cornerstone of the Eastern Front*, translated from the German *Rshew: Eckpfeiler der Ostefront*, (Freidberg, 1980), and Anton Detlev von Plato, *Die Geschichte der 5. Panzerdivision 1938 bis 1945*, (Regensburg: Walhalla u. Praetoria Verl. KG Geog Zwickenpflug, 1978), 23-257. [BACK](#)

<sup>26.</sup> The 31st Army led its attack with the 88th, 336th, and 239th Rifle Divisions, supported by the 332d and 145th Tank Brigades. The defending Germans decimated both tank brigades in three days of battle and inflicted huge losses on the Soviet rifle divisions. [BACK](#)

<sup>27.</sup> The story of the German 102d Infantry Division, in particular, the intelligence situation before the operation, is found in David Kahn, "An Intelligence Case History: The Defense of Osuga, 1942," *Aerospace Historian*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter/December 1981), 242-251. [BACK](#)

<sup>28.</sup> In the sector between the Osuga and Vazusa Rivers, the German 102d Infantry Division's 195th Infantry Regiment defeated the Soviet 326th, 42d Guards, and 251st Rifle Divisions, which were supported by the 25th and 93d Tank Brigades. [BACK](#)

<sup>29.</sup> Mukhin's division was supported by the 80th and 240th Tank Brigades. [BACK](#)

<sup>30.</sup> The second echelon 8th Guards Rifle Corps consisted of the 26th Guards Rifle Division, the 148th and 150th Rifle Brigades, and the 11th and 18th Tank Brigades. Its mission was to expand the bridgehead and facilitate the exploitation by the Soviet mobile group. In addition, the 20th Army had the 1st Guards Motorized Rifle Division and the 31st Tank Brigade in army reserve. The mobile group was, in reality, a cavalry-



mechanized group consisting of the 6th Tank and 2d Guards Cavalry Corps. Mobile groups, the forerunners of the modern operational maneuver group (OMG), had the specific mission of conducting an operational exploitation of the tactical penetration. [BACK](#)

<sup>31</sup>. A Soviet after-action account recorded, "The responsible 20th Army staff officers who were in charge of the crossing sites had such a poor understanding of the situation that they continued to permit transport and rear service units to cross to the western bank at the same time that combat elements of the exploitation echelon remained on the river's eastern bank." [BACK](#)

<sup>32</sup>. Arman's 22d and 20th Tank Brigades and 6th Motorized Rifle Brigade made it across the road, but with heavy losses, while his 100th Tank Brigade remained in the bridgehead, stopped by interlocking German strong points. [BACK](#)

<sup>33</sup>. Elements of Kriukov's 2d and 3d Guards Cavalry Divisions and his entire 20th Cavalry Division made it across the road. His 4th Guards Cavalry Division and corps headquarters did not. [BACK](#)

<sup>34</sup>. See Grossman, 45. [BACK](#)

<sup>35</sup>. *SMPIOV*, No. 9, 146. [BACK](#)

<sup>36</sup>. Grossman, 44 and von Plato, 245-247. [BACK](#)

<sup>37</sup>. The immense traffic jam along the Vazusa River also delayed the forward deployment of supporting artillery. [BACK](#)

<sup>38</sup>. For details on the Soviet offensive in the Belyi sector, see M. D. Solomatin, *Krasnogradtsy* [The men of Krasnograd], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1963), "Report by the 3d Air Army Representative with the 1st MC During Operation "Mars," *TsAMO*, F. 311, Op. 311, D. 24, LL. 86-87. Original document from the archives (Translator unknown), and "*Boevye doneseniiia I operativnye svodki shataba I mekhkorpua*" [Combat report and operational summary of 1st Mechanized Corps' headquarters], *TsAMO*, F. 3404, Op. 1, D. 2, LL. 2-36. [BACK](#)

<sup>39</sup>. Popov's rifle corps consisted of the 150th Rifle Division and the 74th, 75th, 78th, and 91st Rifle Brigades, and Solomatin's corps, the 65th and 219th Tank and the 19th, 35th, and 37th Mechanized Brigades. [BACK](#)

<sup>40</sup>. Solomatin's corps numbered 10 heavy KV, 119 medium T-34, and 95 light T-70 tanks, See the corps' after-action report at *TsAMO*, F. 3424, Op. 1. D. 2, LL. 2-36. [BACK](#)

<sup>41</sup>. Popov's infantry accompanied Solomatin's advance, but, since it lagged behind the armor, it made seizure of the Belyi-Vladiirskoe road more difficult. [BACK](#)

<sup>42</sup>. Solomatin, 22-23. [BACK](#)

<sup>43</sup>. Rolf O. G. Stoves, *I. Panzer-Division 1935-1945*, (Bad Nauheim: Verlag Hans-Henning Podzun, 1961), 380. [BACK](#)

<sup>44</sup>. Ibid. [BACK](#)

<sup>45</sup>. The initial Soviet assault routed a regiment of the German 246th Infantry Division. Tarasov believed few German reserves were available to defend the city. Moreover, since Belyi had held out during and since the Soviet Winter offensive of 1941-1942, it was an even more enticing target. [BACK](#)

<sup>46</sup>. Gruz's division was reinforced, first, by Solomatin's 19th Mechanized Brigade and, subsequently, by the 91st Rifle Brigade. [BACK](#)

<sup>47</sup>. For details on German actions in the Belyi sector, see Grossman, *Rzhev*, and Rolf O. G. Stoves, *I. Panzer-Division 1935-1945*, (Bad Neuheim: Verlag Hans-Henning Podzun, 1961), 375-409. [BACK](#)

<sup>48</sup>. Group von Weitersheim consisted of the 1st Panzer Division's 113th Panzer Grenadier Regiment and Group Kassnitz of *Grossdeutschland* Panzer Grenadier Division's Fusilier Regiment. [BACK](#)

<sup>49</sup>. The Belyi-Vladimirscoe road was the only German resupply route into Belyi. [BACK](#)

<sup>50</sup>. The 47th and 48th Mechanized Brigades were in army reserve, each with a regiment of 39 tanks. [BACK](#)

<sup>51</sup>. In his memoirs, *Nastupala grozhaia bronja* [Threatening armor attacks], (Kiev: Politicheskoi literatury Ukrainy, 1981), 38, Dremov notes only that his brigade took part in "an unsuccessful operation near Belyi." [BACK](#)

<sup>52</sup>. For additional details on the German Ninth Army's defense and detailed intelligence information on Soviet forces throughout the operation, see "Tatigkeitsbericht der Abteilung Ic/A.O." dated 1 July-3 Dec 1942, AOK 9, 27970/6 in National Archives (NAM) microfilm series NAM T-312, Roll 304. Daily operational and intelligence maps accompany these reports. [BACK](#)

<sup>53</sup>. *Grossdeutschland's* Grenadier Regiment fielded forward a battalion at a time after helping repulse the Soviet assault further north. Details on Soviet operations in the Luchesa River valley are sketchy. See M. E. Katukov, *Na ostrie glavnogo udara* [At the point of the main attack], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), which, although it admits the operation took place, says little about its conduct. Memoirs by brigade commanders Babadzhanian and Dragunsky are little better. The records of the Ninth Army and the *Grossdeutschland* Division provide the most detailed and accurate account and confirm which Soviet units took part in the action. [BACK](#)

<sup>54</sup>. During this period General Iushkevich committed his 114th Rifle Brigade and 39th Tank Regiment from his army reserve . When these forces proved inadequate to the task, he began shifting rifle regiments into battle from other army sectors. The Germans, however, matched these piecemeal reinforcements with just enough strength to hold Iushkevich's army at bay but not enough to close the breach. [BACK](#)

<sup>55</sup>. Grossman, 54. [BACK](#)

<sup>56</sup>. Ibid. [BACK](#)

<sup>57</sup>. General Zygin's 39th Army assaulted along the Molodoi Tud with the 373d, 135th, and 158th Rifle Divisions, supported by the 28th and 81st Tank Brigades. He attacked on the flanks with four rifle brigades, the 100th and 117th on the right and the 136th and 101st on the left, supported by 28th and 29th Tank Regiments. For the few Soviet details see, V. P. Boiko, *S dumoi o Rodine* [With thoughts about the Homeland], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1979) and N. M. Khlebnikov, *Pod grokhot soten bateriei* [Under the thunder of hundreds of batteries], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1979). The former was the commander of the 28th Tank Brigade and the latter was the 39th Army chief of artillery. [BACK](#)

<sup>58</sup>. The 100th Rifle Brigade broke through the German 253d Infantry Division's defenses southwest of Molodoi Tud city and advanced 5 kilometers into the German rear. A skillful counterattack by two battalions from *Grossdeutschland* Division's Grenadier Regiment thwarted the Soviet advance, which Zygin was unable to reinforce. Thereafter, *Grossdeutschland's* two battalions speedily regrouped to meet the Soviet attack in the Luchesa River valley. [BACK](#)

<sup>59</sup>. Getman, 73-74 and *SMPIOV*, No. 9, 148-149. All of Colonel Arman's brigades were decimated except for the 100th Tank Brigade, which had been unable to accompany the corps in its drive across the road. [BACK](#)

<sup>60</sup>. For details of the 20th Cavalry Division's "raid" through the German rear, see A. I. Sekretov, *Gvardeiskaia postup' (boevoi put' 17-I Mozyrskoi Krasnoznamennoi ordena Lenina, Suvorova I Kutuzova kavaleriiskoi divizii, podvhefnoi Tadzhikistnu, v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-1945 gg.)* [Guards gait (the combat path of the Mozyr, Red Banner, Orders of Lenin, Suvorov, and Kutuzov 17th Guards Cavalry Division, sponsored by Tadzhikistan in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945), (Dushanbe: "Donish, " 1985), 40-48. [BACK](#)

<sup>61</sup>. von Plato, 250. [BACK](#)

<sup>62</sup>. Getman, 74. [BACK](#)

<sup>63</sup>. von Plato, 251. [BACK](#)

<sup>64</sup>. Solomatin, 28-29. Solomatin had already withdrawn his 37th Mechanized Brigade from the outskirts of Vladimirscoe, where it had severed the critical German rail line and road to Belyi. [BACK](#)

<sup>65</sup>. The German Ninth Army's records confirm the interdiction efforts by Soviet partisans, which significantly slowed the 20th Panzer Division's advance. [BACK](#)

<sup>66</sup>. See Solomatin, 30-35 and the 1st Mechanized Corps' after-action report, which are remarkably similar. [BACK](#)

<sup>67</sup>. See Getman, 74, who states that his 6th Tank Corps' strength had increased to 100 tanks by 11 December, and A. D. Kochetkov, *Dvinskiii tankovy: boevoi put'5-go tankovogo dvinskogo korpusa* [The Dvina Tank: the combat path of the 5th Dvina Tank Corps], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1989). The latter provides detail on the tank corps' strength and its role in the December operation. It tracks well with 5th Tank Corps' archival documents. [BACK](#)

<sup>68</sup>. See combat reports in the 5th Tank Corps archival files at *TsAMO*, F. 3404, Op. 1, D. 9, 10, and 259, which include records of daily actions and losses from 11-15 December. [BACK](#)

<sup>69</sup>. Kochetkov, 11. [BACK](#)

<sup>70</sup>. "Feindnachrichtenblatt Nr 140," *Armeeoberkommando 9, Ic/A.*), Nr. 3291/geh., *A.H.Qu., den 15 Dezember1942.* in National Archive Microfilm [NAM] series T-312, Roll 304. [BACK](#)

<sup>71</sup>. *TsAMO*, F. 3424, Op. 1, D. 2, L.. 36. [BACK](#)

<sup>72</sup>. *Ibid.*, F. 373, Op. 6631, D. 56, L. 3-54. [BACK](#)

<sup>73</sup>. *Ibid.*, F. 3424, Op. 1, D. 2, LL. 2-36. [BACK](#)

<sup>74</sup>. *Ibid.*, F. 825, Op. 1, D. 32, LL. 63-73. [BACK](#)

<sup>75</sup>. The casualty tally in individual Soviet formations was equally shocking. In its after-action report, Kiriukhin's 20th Army recorded 58,524 men lost out of 114,176 originally committed. The army's 8th Guards Rifle Corps lost 6,058 men in the five days of combat, and, by 7 December, the corps' 26th Guards Rifle Division had just over 400 "fighters" remaining. At the time, the 148th Separate Rifle Brigade had 47 riflemen remaining and the 150th Rifle Brigade only 110. The tank and mechanized corps too were decimated. The 6th Tank Corps lost virtually its entire strength twice over, the 1st Mechanized Corps was essentially destroyed, and the 5th Tank Corps, whose tanks went into combat without their white camouflage paint, lost its entire complement of tanks in three days of combat. Its 5th Motorized Rifle Brigade counted over 1,500 dead, fully 70 percent of its combat strength. By 15 December the corps could muster only one composite rifle battalion.

These losses were but a microcosm of the price the Soviets paid for defeat in Operation Mars. For a detailed survey of Soviet losses, see German Ninth Army records and Soviet archival documents cited above. [BACK](#)

<sup>76.</sup> von Plato, 256 and Stoves, 408. [BACK](#)

<sup>77.</sup> A. L. Getman, *Tanki idut na Berlin (1941-1945)* [The tanks advance on Berlin (1941-1945)], (Moscow: "Nauka," 1973), 76. [BACK](#)

<sup>78.</sup> "Feindachrichtenblatt Nr. 140. [BACK](#)